



## An inside look at what has become a must-attend event.

By Ronald N. Langston

In March of 2001, I was appointed by President George W. Bush as national director of the **Minority Business Development Agency** (MBDA). Within the first couple of months of my arrival, I was convening my first **Minority Enterprise Development** (MED) Week committee meeting. The room was packed. There was great anticipation in the air and concern that MED Week was only five months away.

I was impressed by the number of

corporate representatives, federal agencies, trade associations, and chamber of commerce executives present. Also present were several former MBDA directors. The most focused person in the room was Benita Fortner of Raytheon Company, who quickly and succinctly briefed me on MED Week and its importance to the minority business enterprise community.

The first MED Week was com-memorated in 1983 during the first week

of October as proclaimed by President Ronald Reagan. It was a simple, yet heartfelt gathering of MBDA staff, representatives from minority business associations, business owners, and others. The gathering of approximately 100 people took place at the Department of Commerce in Washington, D.C.

Subsequent MED Weeks followed this same pattern through the 1980s when leadership from the MBDA and the U.S. Small Business Administration

# MED Week *(continued)*

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came together to leverage resources and design a commemorative format that would recognize the nation's minority business enterprises. Attendance grew to several hundred people, and a minority business trade show/exhibition was added. The Minority Entrepreneur of the Year award was expanded to recognize separately a Female Entrepreneur of the Year and a Male Entrepreneur of the Year. In addition, the new format included a visit to the White House for MED Week award winners. During this same era, there was agreement that the annual commemoration of MED Week needed to transcend the nation's capital. Therefore, the MBDA introduced regional and local MED Week celebrations, planned and executed by the MBDA regional offices and local minority business development centers operated by MBDA grantees.

New to my position and having just analyzed the recently released 1992-1997 Surveys of Minority-Owned Business Enterprises (SMOBE) data from the U.S. Census Bureau, I started my first MED Week committee meeting with the premise that the SMOBE data made a compelling business case for a unified strategy to "move the numbers" and pursue entrepreneurial parity.

The data clearly showed the growth and expansion of minority business enterprises nationally. However, the growth in gross receipts lagged at 3 percent for all minority business enterprises. A disproportionate number of minority business enterprises were micro-businesses lacking the size, scale, and capacity to compete. Approximately 85 percent of all minority business enterprises reported annual gross receipts of less than \$100,000 and only 3 percent had receipts of \$1 million or more.

With this in mind, I suggested "Strategies for Growth" as the MED Week 2001 theme. In addition, I recommended we stress the message that minority business enterprises should no longer rely on the government alone as the primary engine for minority business growth. Rather, we needed to promote and in-

still the long-term value proposition of building minority business enterprises in size, scale, and capacity so they could compete on their own in the global marketplace.

Another key decision made during the first six months of my arrival was to create synergies between the regional and national MED Week events. Effective immediately, the regional MED Week themes would parallel the national theme so there would be a MED Week identity across the country.

## A New Benchmark

As the Agency approached MED Week 2001, scheduled for September 21-23, there was a new sense of energy and direction and plans were coming together. Then, the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. changed everything.

What didn't change was our determination, in light of President Bush's message to continue our lives and to not let the terrorists dictate our future. There was heated discussion inside the MBDA and among the MED Week committee leadership whether to postpone or proceed with the MED Week event in view of the death and destruction, and fear of travel, especially by air. I talked internally with the Department of Commerce and expressed my desire to still hold MED Week. Calls were made to the White House; which, upon learning of my request to proceed with MED Week, informed Secretary Donald Evans that if I was willing to go forward, the Administration would help. I responded by requesting they participate in a Meet Your White House breakfast series. They agreed, and the White House breakfast series, featuring Administration senior-level leaders, was launched.

When it was clear that MED Week would go forward, I was deeply moved by the calls and e-mail messages from minority business enterprises across the nation encouraging the MBDA to proceed and offering assurances of their attendance. We had approximately 1,000 participants.

The courage to attend and support

MED Week 2001 was only part of the leadership qualities exhibited by the MED Week committee and MBDA staff who carried out their commitment to MBDA and the minority business community in an atmosphere of uncertainty and highly charged emotions. I witnessed great leadership from Brenda Schneider of Comerica Bank; Michael Bush of Lockheed Martin; James H. Richardson Gonzales, a former director of MBDA who was then representing Verizon; *MBE* magazine, and Dave Miller, Sr. of D.J. Miller and Associates (now known as the Miller<sup>3</sup>Group, Inc.).

We were equally fortunate to have first-class presenters, including former Secretary of Commerce Donald Evans, futurist Alvin Toffler, and Karl Rove, chief strategist for the White House. The forums and workshops were well attended and, within the protective walls of the historic Omni Shoreham Hotel, we witnessed the emergence of an *esprit de corps* and a new era of commitment. MED Week 2001 became the new model and the benchmark.

## Continued Success

In subsequent years, MED Week has remained true to its origins of celebrating the economic contributions of minority business enterprises and recognizing some of the most accomplished minority business owners and advocates in the nation. It has also achieved one of my objectives, which has been to brand MED Week as the most thought-provoking, must-attend conference on the state of minority business enterprise. This has been actualized by establishing substantive MED Week themes and topics with America's top thought leaders across a wide spectrum of knowledge. MED Week themes for the last five years have been:

- Strategies for Growth-Part II: Minorities and the Entrepreneurial Economy (2002);

- Strategies for Growth-Part III: Minorities in the Global Economy (2003);

- Forward to the Future: Minority Business Enterprises—The National Priority (2004);

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•Minority Business Enterprises: The Art of the Deal, Making It Happen (2005); and

•Minority Business Enterprises: Mastering the Supply Chain (2006).

The formation of panel forums, workshops, and premier luncheon speakers, ranging from the Vice President of the United States to cabinet secretaries; and the participation of senior-level corporate executives from Raytheon Company, IBM, FedEx, VISA, BAE Systems, Ford Motor Company, General Motors Corporation, DaimlerChrysler, and the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, among others, has changed the image and magnitude of MED Week.

Another significant change affecting the quality of MED Week has been the MBDA and Tuck School of Business strategic alliance. Through Tuck, the national minority business enterprise community has been the beneficiary of three major reports commissioned by the MBDA and released during MED Week. These reports, "Minority Business Enterprises in the Global Economy," "The Life Cycle of Minority Business Enterprises," and "Minority Business Enterprises: Mastering the Supply Chain," are available on the MBDA's website ([www.mbda.gov](http://www.mbda.gov)).

Together, these reports served as a major catalyst of thought leadership about and for minority business enterprises domestically and globally. Most of the MED Week forums and panel discussions have centered on the Tuck papers. They have contributed greatly to making the business case that minority business enterprises are vital and essential to the success of the U.S. economy. The MBDA's dedication to ensuring that minority business enterprises are a national priority has been greatly advanced by the MBDA partnership with Tuck.

## Commemorating 25 Years

The 25th Anniversary of MED Week is a historic milestone, and I am honored to oversee this very special occasion in the history of the MBDA. Serving as chair of the 25th Anniversary MED Week public-private sector planning committee is Howard Li of Waitex International Company. Joining him as co-chairs are Massey Villarreal of the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Foundation and Brenda Schneider of Comerica Bank. Chair emeritus is Benita Fortner of Raytheon Corporation.

Our plan for MED Week 2007 is to continue linking the conference theme with the strategic direction of the President of the United States and the Secretary of Commerce. To this end, this year's MED Week theme, "Celebrating a Legacy of Innovation and Competitiveness," will build upon the President's American Competitiveness Initiative. The MBDA believes minority entrepreneurs must pursue a purposeful strategy of competitive viability in the 21st century global economy by being innovative and attaining size, scale, and capacity.

MED Week 2007 will be unique because the 25th Anniversary presents us with an opportunity to reflect on a past rich with outstanding leaders and accomplishments. In honor of this occasion, Steve Forbes, CEO and president of *Forbes* magazine, has agreed to chair the MED Week 25th Anniversary Honorary Committee, and members of Congress have also come forward with their support. The streamlined schedule of one-and-a-half days will offer participants the "best in class," including Dr. Vijay Govindarajan, renowned innovation expert and author of "Ten Rules for Strategic Innovators: From Idea to Execution."

A new twist to the White House breakfast will be a Billion Dollar Round-table breakfast to recognize the companies that procure at least \$1 billion worth of products and services from minority entrepreneurs. Components of MED Week that participants have come to expect, such as the captivating plenary sessions, the State of Commerce Luncheon, and the Social Capital Networking Reception, are also planned. Finally, in tribute to the trailblazers, pioneers, and minority entrepreneurs who have achieved and given so much, the National Director's Lifetime Achievement Award will be presented to legacy recipients during the 25th Anniversary Awards Gala.

On behalf of the MED Week public-private sector planning committee and the MBDA staff, we look forward to seeing you on September 13-14, 2007, at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of MED Week. ♦

*Ronald N. Langston was appointed by President George W. Bush as the head of the Minority Business Development Agency (MBDA) on March 19, 2001. Langston is an experienced executive, who brings a wealth of expertise from the public, private, and non-profit sectors to his position at the MBDA. As national director, he has initiated a transformation of the MBDA from an administrative agency to an entrepreneurial organization that focuses on entrepreneurial training, managing organizational knowledge, and strengthening the performance verification of its core competencies.*



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